

To the twelve tribes

• Heirs of everything God wanted to do through the original Israel

• James's readers were in bad spiritual trouble

• First words – 'count your trials as pure joy'

• These people were backslidden

• James the Lord's brother

• Written early on

Trials and difficulties

(i) God allows them

(ii) God sends His word

• How you face trials and tribulations will affect your spiritual growth

The letter to James could be called a guide to spiritual recovery. It was obviously written to Jewish people, for James begins his letter as follows: *'James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings'*¹. The phrase 'the twelve tribes' is a strange one because the twelve tribes of Israel no longer existed. In the 720s BC, the northern ten tribes of Israel were deported to Assyria. They never came back to Israel, and they never retained their identity as Israelites. Many were killed. Some perhaps inter-married with Assyrians. Certainly the ten northern tribes lost their identity as distinct and recognizable tribes. So what does James mean? It is his way of saying that Jewish Christians are the true heirs of everything God was wanting to do through the original people of Israel. They are now 'the twelve tribes'. No one else has more right to claim the name. They too are scattered in different parts of the world.

1:1

James's readers were in bad spiritual trouble. It is obvious when we read James' letter that they had become proud and critical people. They discriminated against the poor. They did not control their tongues. They were arrogant towards their employees. They were also facing many trials and troubles. God was not answering their prayers. Success was not coming their way.

So what is the first thing you say to such people? James says: *'Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds', because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.'*

1:2
1:3

James is a guide to holiness of living, a guide to spiritual restoration. These people were backslidden. They were saved but they were in a very poor spiritual state. They were upright people but their attitudes were altogether bad. They were inconspicuous backsliders, respectable backsliders. They practised discrimination. When you practise discrimination you lose the people against whom you discriminate. You also lose the people in whose favour you discriminate. James will give us an explanation of the place of good works in the Christian life.

There are five or six people called 'James' in the New Testament. This letter was written by James the Lord's brother, senior pastor of the church of Jerusalem for many years. It seems that he wrote this letter very early in the history of the church. He uses a somewhat different vocabulary from the vocabulary of Paul. Probably he did his work before Paul became famous for his doctrine of 'justification'.

What would you put first in your letter if you were seeking to help some people who were respectable backsliders? James begins with the way they must face trials and difficulties. God's way of dealing with sin in His people is (i) to let them fall into some trouble that will drive them to Himself, and (ii) to send them a word from Himself. These people were respectable but they were out of the will of God. God lets troubles come upon them to compel them to come back to Himself. He also sent James to give them a word from Himself. These two things – if they will receive them – will bring them back to the Lord.

How you face trials and tribulations will affect your spiritual growth! God will discipline you. All Christians know something of this (as Hebrews 12:5–13 teaches) but the backslider is setting himself up for more severe chastening than necessary. No Christian should be surprised when a fiery ordeal comes upon him¹, but respectable people who are quietly discriminating against the poor may well find the fire of trouble gets hotter. The New Testament constantly

1:1 see 1 Peter 4:12

• They serve a positive purpose

Responding to troubles

• We need troubles in order to grow spiritually

• We must notice the way troubles come to us

• Sent by the devil – permitted by God

• Trials are to be faced with joyful understanding

• God has a purpose

• Patient endurance produces maturity

warns us that we shall not be able to escape the tribulations of this world^{☞2}. We need troubles in order to grow spiritually. If we face them the right way we shall be 'perfect, lacking in nothing'^{☞3}. Troubles shake us. They disturb our complacency. They disturb our love of the world. They make us see that we need Jesus every day. Troubles help us to discover our weaknesses. They enable us to see ourselves. They humble us. Trouble gets us to depend on the Lord. It is only when we are in some difficulty that we are driven to trust in God in a way that we have never done before.

1. **We need troubles in order to grow spiritually.** I am not saying that trouble is always the result of sin. This is not true. We shall be disciplined even if we are not backsliding^{☞1}. We can be disciplined for a sin that we have not yet committed^{☞2}. But God sends troubles and tribulations to help us.

2. **We must notice the way in which troubles come to us.** They impose themselves. We 'fall' into them. The timing can be terrible. They may be sudden. Think how suddenly they came upon Job. Think how suddenly they came upon Joseph. They are varied. In Job chapter 1, Job experienced one calamity after another.

3. **These trials are sent by the devil; they are permitted by God.** When we are in trouble we may ask: where does this come from, God or the devil? Job chapters 1 and 2 give us the answer. The devil sends trials because he hates you; God allows them because he loves you. The devil sends trials to damage you; God allows trials to strengthen you.

4. **Trials are to be faced with joyful understanding.** We are not to be surprised by them. We do not face them with resentment, nor even with resignation or grim endurance. We face them with joy. We are more than a conqueror in every trouble^{☞1}.

We rejoice not in the trouble itself, but in what we know God is doing. You will be tempted to give in to sin or to grumbling. We do not rejoice at the trouble itself. We rejoice because we know that God has a purpose in what is happening.

We are to show patient endurance. Every trial is bearable^{☞1}. Don't try to end the trial too quickly. Don't try too hard to deliver yourself. Be content with what God is doing with you. Get a forgiving spirit. Accept God's will. The trouble will produce toughness, patience, perseverance – if you face it with the knowledge of what God is doing. If you persist in perseverance it will produce maturity. Every area of your life will be refined and purified. You don't rejoice at the trouble, but you do rejoice in your knowledge of what God is doing. It is the way to spiritual recovery.

☞2 Matthew 5:10-12; Acts 5:41; 2 Corinth. 4:17; 12:9-10; Philippians 1:29
☞3 1:4

☞1 Hebrews 12:5b-6
☞2 2 Corinthians 12:7-9a

☞1 Romans 8:35-39

☞1 1 Corinthians 10:13



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